

## A REPORT

### THE B-24 BOMBER AND WORLD WAR II

#### U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS B-24 "LIBERATOR" BOMBER CRASH ON SAN MIGUEL ISLAND - JULY 5, 1943

BY

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Wing Span: 110' Length: 66'4"

Weight: 36,000 lbs loaded with 8,000 lbs of bombs.

Engines: Four Pratt & Whitney R-1830s of 1,200 hp each

Average Cost Per Aircraft: \$336,000

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Service Ceiling: 28,000 ft

(c)

## THE B-24 BOMBER AND WORLD WAR II

The B-24 bomber, commonly called "Liberator," was employed in every combat theater during World War II. More than 18,000 Liberators were produced during the war era. Ford's Willow Run plant in Michigan produced one B-24 bomber every hour. The Consolidated plant in San Diego manufactured thousands of B-24s. It had a long, thin, high lift wing which made it suitable for long distance bombing missions. During World War II many thousands of Liberators were assigned to combat crew training bases in California. The training was intense and simulated combat missions were flown day and night in order to qualify combat crews for assignment to overseas bases. Because of mass recruiting efforts by the Army Air Corps most of the crews were very young and lacked a good background in flying skills which quickly led to many flying accidents. During the peak training years for B-24 crews in California, Liberator bomber wreckage was scattered from the Mohave Desert to the snow capped peaks of the High Sierra mountain range. Combat crews either loved or hated the aircraft and generally it was not regarded as the safest aircraft in the sky. Yet, it played a major role in helping to win the war in Europe and Asia.

### SPECIFICATIONS

Wing Span: 110' Length: 66'4"

Weight: 56,000 lbs loaded with 8,000 lbs of bombs

Engines: Four Pratt & Whitney R-1830s of 1,200 hp each

Average Cost Per Aircraft: \$336,000

### PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed: 303 mph

Range: 3,200 miles

Service Ceiling: 28,000 ft

### THE FLIGHT CREW

Pilot	Vernon C. Stevens	Flight Officer	T-376
Command Pilot	Douglas Thornburg	1st. Lt.	O-439091
Co Pilot	Floyd P. Hart	2nd. Lt.	O-801277
Bombardier Instructor	Justin M. Marshall	2nd. Lt.	O-729643
Navigator	Bose Gorman	2nd. Lt.	O-801453
Bombardier	Noah H. Yost	2nd. Lt.	O-736746
Engineer	Bernard Littman	S/Sgt.	33283227
Asst' Engineer	Ralph S. Masterson	S/Sgt.	18043151
Radioman	Lyle L. Frost	S/Sgt.	16093784
Gunner	Walter O. Eisenbarth	S/Sgt.	37312876
Gunner	Lee E. Salver	S/Sgt.	13108684
Asst' Radioman	Henry L. Bair	S/Sgt.	33292071

All personnel were members of the 2nd Air Force, 34th Bomb Group, 7th Bomb Squadron stationed at Salinas Army Air Base, Salinas, California. The remains of the crew were returned to their next of kin in accordance with Air Force Reg 62-14, Para 45b.

## PROBABLE CAUSE OF CRASH

### SUMMARY

On 5 July, 1943 , B-24-E 42-7160 departed Bakersfield, Calif., at 7:17 a.m. to conduct a search mission. The flight plan was as follows: Bakersfield to Santa Barbara; to Pt. Conception; to 34 deg North-120 deg 30 min West and return to Santa Barbara; then to Muroc Bombing Range; to Salinas; to Pt. Sur; to an air-to-air gunnery range at 36 deg 16 min North- 122 deg 18 min West and return to Salinas Army Air Base and land at 4:19 p.m. The B-24 reported over Santa Barbara at 8 a.m. and was not heard from again. When the aircraft failed to show up at its home base an extensive search was conducted and continued on until 9 July at which time it was called off. Weather conditions around Santa Barbara and out to sea at the time of the aircraft's last position report were low clouds with a ceiling of 300 to 500 feet with the cloud tops at 1,600 feet.

On 19 March, 1944 the B-24 wreckage was discovered on San Miguel Island by several sailors who were based at the island's weather/radio station. The remains of the crew members were removed from the crash site by Army and Navy personnel.

The B-24-E was manufactured at the Ford Motor Company's Willow Run Plant in Michigan during April 1943 at a cost of \$305,711.

The aircraft apparently was descending through the clouds and turning on a heading for Pt. Conception when it struck the island.

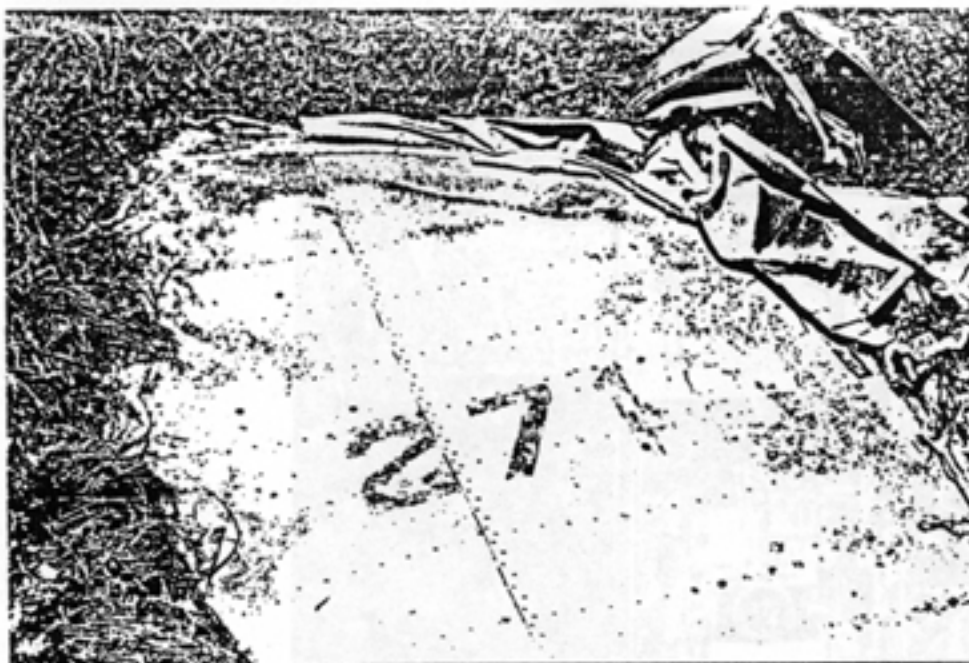
### PROBABLE CAUSE OF CRASH

Based upon 36 high-resolution photographs showing various parts of the B24 wreckage in conjunction with a detailed topographic map of the area the following appears to have been the probable cause for the crash:

The aircraft was on an approximate heading of 240 degrees at an altitude of 500-ft flying in obscured weather conditions when it contacted the gradual rising slope of an 800-ft high hill and disintegrated.

Close examination of the photographs showed all propeller blades to be set at a high pitch angle indicating the aircraft was flying in a normal cruise condition, as opposed to a low pitch blade setting indicating take off or landing blade angles. One main landing gear strut (in the partially burned wing section) was in the retracted position as was the nose gear strut. The bottom of the right vertical stabilizer was crushed indicating it made contact with the ground while the aircraft was still in a level flight attitude. The top portion of the right vertical stabilizer was also crushed indicating it may have broken off after impact and landed upside down. The aircraft's painted identification number was clearly visible on the right vertical stabilizer making the wreckage easy to identify. No propellers were in the feathered position which would have indicated engine problems. All propeller blades bore deep rotation marks which indicated they were turning at a high revolution at the time of impact with the rising terrain. The wreckage was scattered in a fan-shaped pattern covering almost one acre. Wreckage indicates aircraft was partially consumed by fire after impact.

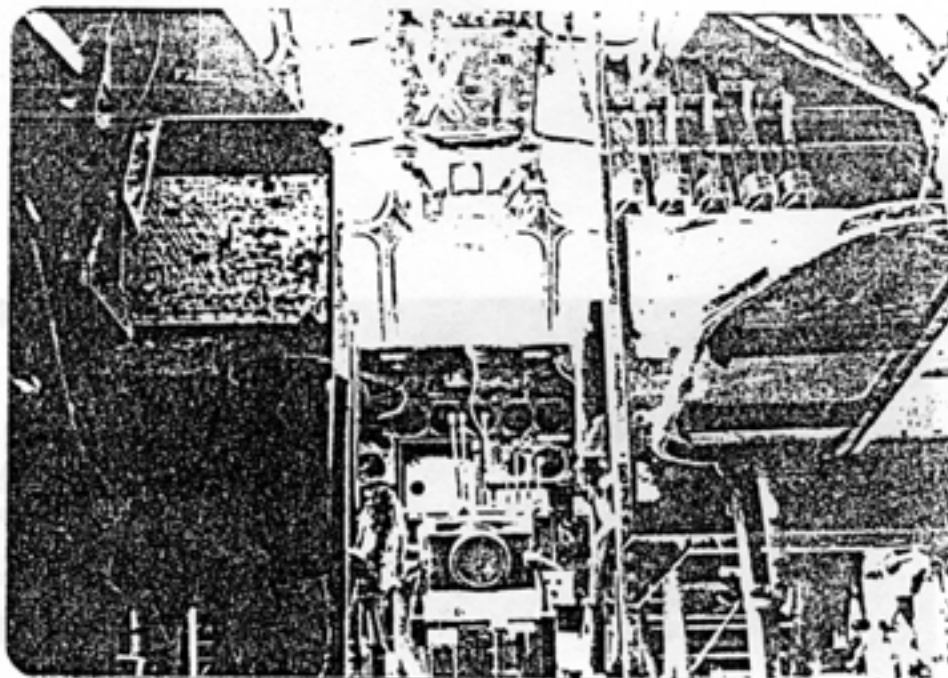
Based upon the location of the wreckage in relation to the 800-ft hill it appears the aircraft flew straight and level on to the ground without seeing the obstruction. Such accidents usually indicate that the aircraft was flying in the clouds or obscured weather conditions. Also, aircraft of this vintage carried no radar. Was this B-24 lost due to a navigation error? Was it trying to go under low clouds to see possible landmarks? We'll never know.



Liberator's right vertical fin with crushed top portion indicating tail broke off upon impact and hit the ground in an upside-down attitude. Tail number 27160 can be clearly seen in this view. Photos taken on San Miguel Island, August 17th, 1984 by Park Ranger Tom Cox.



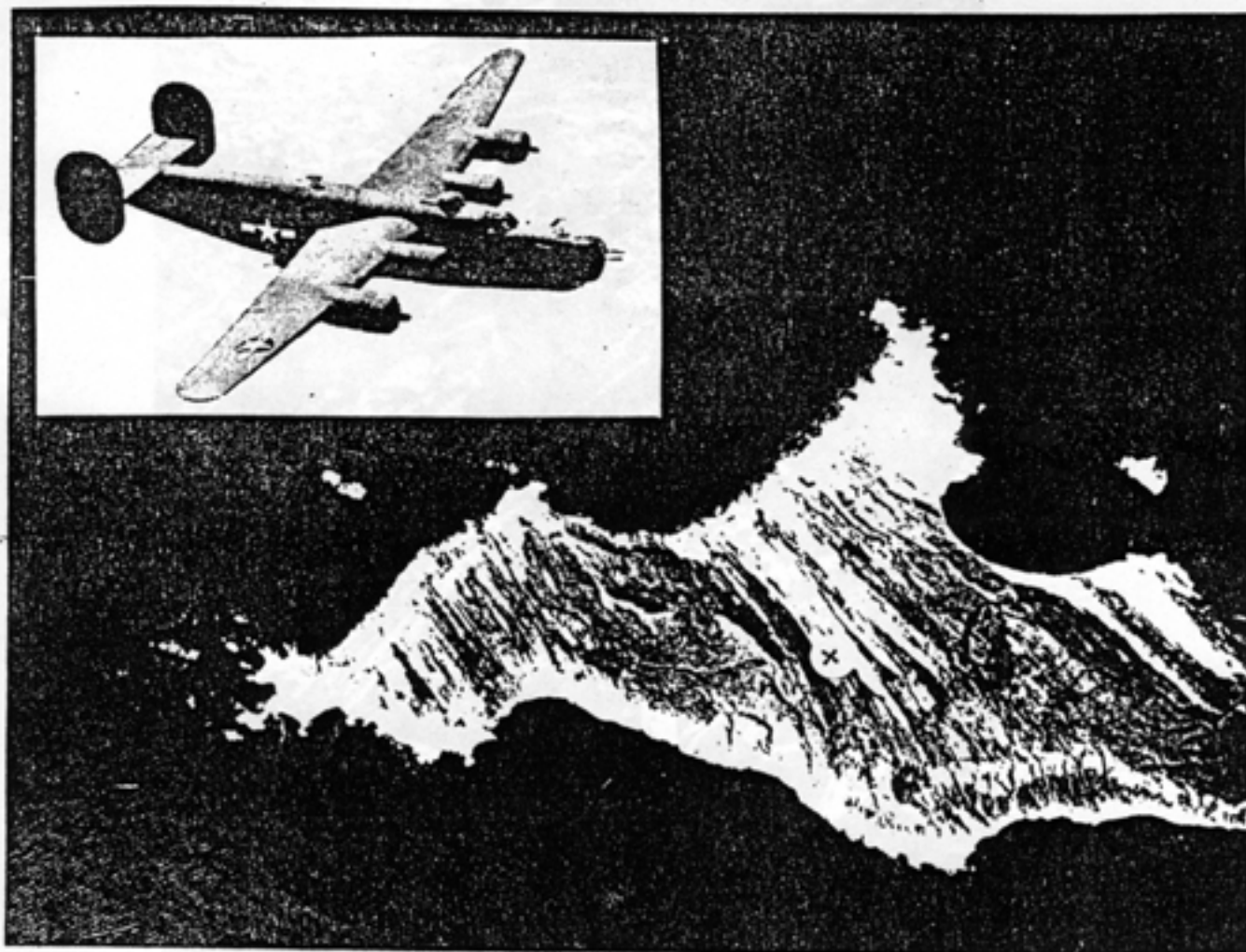
B-24's nose gear strut in retracted position indicating gear was not extended for landing when the bomber contacted the island.



Upper right corner photograph shows a complete B-24 cockpit section as viewed looking forward from the bomb bay. Lower center of photo shows the throttle quadrant, containing the mixture and pitch controls in addition to the control surface trim tab wheels.

Photograph to the immediate right shows the throttle quadrant assembly from the San Miguel Island B-24 crash. Comparing both photos will show how the quadrant was located in the B-24. It was positioned just in front and between the pilot and copilot's position.





Aerial photograph of San Miguel Island taken on October 19th, 1981. Inset shows a B-24 "Liberator" bomber similar to the one which crashed on the island July 5th, 1943 and was not discovered until March 1944.



Scattered wreckage on the 12,000-ft ridge of Koip Peak, located seven miles northwest of June Lake, California, is from a B-24-E bomber which was stationed at Salinas Army Air Base. The aircraft carried the serial number 42-7118 and crashed only 14 days prior to the San Miguel Island B-24 mishap. The B-24 was returning from Tonopah, Nevada when it struck the ridge at 9:25 p.m. The pilot, 2nd Lt. William E. Hunt, and his crew of six were killed instantly. The bomber was assigned to the 34th Bomb Group, 7th Bomb Squadron at Salinas.

### A DECADE LATER

On a clear September's day during 1954 several hikers who were exploring San Miguel Island came across the old B-24 wreckage. Not knowing anything of its past history they closely examined the various aluminum parts scattered about the crash site. Quite unexpectedly they discovered some human bones near the wreck. Their immediate impression was that this old aircraft probably had never before been discovered. Upon their return to the mainland they notified the authorities of their discovery and told of finding some bones near the wreckage. The local authorities notified the military and a records check of old aircraft crash sites failed to show a B-24 wreck on San Miguel Island. Such a finding greatly interested the Air Force because two B-24s were known to be missing in California from the World War II era and had yet to be found. The Air Force's Memorial Affairs Branch, Identification Section, located at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio dispatched two civilians, Robert W. Ralston and George J. Schwaderer plus seven enlisted personnel to make an identification of the bones at the crash site. On arrival at Norton Air Force Base they were joined by three medical people from Norton's hospital. The identification team, now 12 in all, boarded the Coast Guard cutter Morris at Terminal Island in Los Angeles Harbor and departed for San Miguel Island at 13 minutes after midnight, October 2, 1954.

Meanwhile, the sleek 60-ft ketch Aloha was being made ready to depart Santa Barbara Harbor for Newport Beach, a sea journey that normally took 11 hours. The skipper of the Aloha was Ronnie Caspers, 27. His wife Bea, 26, and three friends, Emile Boisot, 32; Martha Kurz, 25, and Harold Kelly, 61, were also on the ketch. The group departed Santa Barbara Harbor at 2:30 a.m. to insure their arrival at Newport Beach before dark. The weather was fair and the stars could be seen clearly through the inky blackness. The Aloha, its sails furled, was under power and making about 10 knots. Approximately two hours later the Aloha's position was about five miles off Pt. Mugu as it continued its southerly course. Then, with almost no warning, the Morris appeared out of the darkness and sliced into the Aloha amidships. The Coast Guard Officer-On-Deck at the time of the collision was Ensign James A. Frost. He immediately ordered the Morris to reverse engines and back off but by then it was too late. The Morris had pierced the side of the Aloha almost four feet leaving a gaping hole. The saltwater rushed in and the Aloha sank about one minute later, 4:59 a.m. Casper's wife and Harold Kelly were trapped inside the Aloha and went down with it. Though an intensive search was conducted their bodies were never recovered. The Morris recovered the three remaining survivors and returned to Terminal Island.

At 2:25 p.m. the Morris again departed Terminal Island and set its course for San Miguel Island. Early the next morning, October 3rd, the investigative party went ashore on San Miguel and hiked to the old crash site. The investigators found several bones and some coins but nothing of any importance. Evidence indicated the wreckage had been visited before, possibly many times, leading the investigators to believe that this particular wreck was not an undiscovered B-24 aircraft. Armed with these findings the air force team went back to the Morris and sent a message to the 11th Coast Guard Operations Center in Long Beach telling of their findings. Shortly thereafter the Morris received a radio message from Coast Guard Operations in Long Beach advising that the suspect wreck was a World War II training plane which had crashed on the island and that the Morris should return to its anchorage at Terminal Island.

The Morris' arrival marked the end of the official investigation concerning the San Miguel Island B-24 wreckage.

A special board of inquiry was formed in Long Beach Coast Guard Headquarters shortly after the Morris arrived at Terminal Island to determine the circumstances surrounding the collision mishap. Those findings are now a matter of record and are filed at Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

Sometime during August 1955 one of the long missing B-24 bombers was found at the bottom of Huntington Lake located 60 miles north of Fresno, Calif.. On July 17, 1960 the other missing B-24 was discovered by Park Service Ranger Leroy Brock near a small High Sierra lake west of Bishop, Calif.. The lake has since been named Hester Lake in honor of the B-24's copilot. Both bombers had disappeared during December 1943 after taking off from their base at Hammer Field, Fresno, California, now commonly known as Fresno Air Terminal.

## Bomber Found



The Coast Guard Cutter Morris (W147) which was directed to proceed to San Miguel Island with an Air Force investigative team on October 2nd, 1954. At 4:58 a.m. the Morris collided with the 60-ft ketch Aloha off Pt. Mugu and the ketch sank almost immediately. Two civilians on the ketch were lost at sea. The ketch's three survivors were later returned to Terminal Island in Los Angeles Harbor. The rapid sinking of the ketch was attributed to her 10-ton lead keel. The Morris was retired from active service in 1970.

## Bomber Found With 12 Dead

SANTA MARIA, March 20.  
(U.P.)—Wreckage of an Army  
bomber missing since last July  
has been discovered on San  
Miguel Island in the Santa  
Barbara Channel with 12 bodies  
aboard, Santa Maria Army air-  
field officials reported today.  
Details were withheld pending  
investigation.

Above Los Angeles Times article, dated March 21, 1944 was the first evidence that the missing bomber had been located on San Miguel Island.

Los Angeles Times article, on the right, was dated October 2, 1954, ten years later. This article clearly leaves the impression that no previous investigation had been made. It is quite obvious that somewhere along the military chain of command the 1944 B-24 investigation failed to be recorded in its proper place. If it had been, the Coast Guard cutter Morris would never have been dispatched to San Miguel Island.

Clipping on the right lists the incorrect serial number for the aircraft. It should read 27160.

The 1954 clipping also mentions that an investigation team flew to San Miguel Island via helicopter. However, this did not happen and appears to be a newspaperman's eager attempt to get a jump on the news. The entire investigative team was transported to the island on the Morris.

The US Air Force organization which maintains a comprehensive aircraft locator file for the United States region showing aircraft crashes by date and coordinates still did not have any record of the San Miguel Island B-24 crash as of July 1984. This organization is known as Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois.

## Air Force Seeks Names in 1943 Crash on Island

A special Air Force identification team flew by helicopter to lonely San Miguel Island off Santa Barbara yesterday to undertake the grim task of identifying the remains of 12 crewmen killed in the crash of a Liberator bomber July 5, 1943.

The World War II wreckage, more than 11 years old, was discovered several days ago and has been definitely identified as that of B-24 No. 27180 that took off from Salinas Air Force Base with eight officers and four enlisted men aboard.

### Last Report

It was last reported two hours later near Santa Barbara and apparently the pilot attempted to crash-land the Liberator on the grassy tableland of the island some 60 miles off the California coast.

Robert W. Ralston and George J. Schwaderer were assigned out of Air Materiel Command headquarters (Memorial Affairs Branch) to attempt identification of the crew and return the bodies to the mainland for burial, according to Brig. Gen. Victor Bertrاندias, Air Force deputy inspector general, Norton Air Force Base, San Bernardino.

Names of the dead were withheld pending identification and notification of next of kin. The 12 men had been listed as missing and presumably dead.

# Plane Crash 11 Years Ago Linked to Sea Tragedy

## Coast Guard Cutter Was En Route to Scene Where 12 Died When It Collided With Yacht

An 11-year-old plane crash on lonely San Miguel Island, which claimed 12 lives in 1943, yesterday contributed to a crash at sea which claimed two more.

The Coast Guard cutter Morris, which collided with the yacht Aloha off Port Hueneme yesterday, was en route to San Miguel Island with a team of Air Force and civilian identification experts to search the scene where a B-24 Liberator bomber crashed with 12 crewmen aboard on July 5, 1943.

### Knew of Crash

But two former Navy sailors yesterday told The Times that they knew of the bomber crash in 1944 and helped recover bodies at the scene then.

Friday, officials at Norton Air Force Base had termed the new discovery of the wreckage, by fishermen, "the first word" of the missing bomber since it disappeared in 1943.

Stan Sokolis, 33, of 3740 Arbolada Road, said yesterday, however, that he and another sailor stationed with a radio unit on the island discovered the demolished craft in March, 1944.

Sokolis and a friend, Robert McKee, 31, of 816 1/2 N Benton Way, took part in salvage work and removal of the bodies, they said while showing pictures of the crash.

The files of The Times contain an announcement on March 20, 1944, that the Air Force, then the Army, Air Corps, had discovered the wreckage and was conducting an investigation.

A public information officer at Norton Air Force Base, quizzed about the matter, said that there apparently had been an error.

### Records Not Up to Date

"We didn't know about the 1944 search," he said. "Our records must not have been up to date."

He said that two civilians accompanying eight servicemen in the identification team flew here from Dayton, O., to take part in the trip to San Miguel aboard the Morris. The two are members of the Memorial Affairs Branch, Identification Section, of the Air Materiel Command.

## REFERENCES AND SOURCES

1. National Park Service personnel: Nicholas Whelan; Gary E. Davis; Tom Cox. Channel Islands National Park-1901 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, CA 93001. All by correspondence.
2. Dr. Lois Roberts-Pacific Palisades, CA 90272. Initial Leads, by letter. 3. Mr. Carl Gibbs-Exxon Shipping Company. Former radio operator on the Coast Guard cutter Morris. By letter and telephone.
4. Commander Garth Clizbe- Prescott, AZ 86301, US Coast Guard (Ret'd) Former commander of the Morris. By correspondence.
5. Lt. D.E. Ware-US Coast Guard, Chief Telecommunications Branch, 11th Coast Guard District, Long Beach, CA 90822. By letter.
6. Mr. R.L. Scheina-Historian. US Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C. 20593. By correspondence.
7. Mr. Vincent P. Murone-Chief Reports Branch, HQ USAF Inspection & Safety Center, Norton AFB, CA., 92409. By correspondence.
8. Dr. Larry Wilson-Records Management Branch, National Air & Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. By letter.
9. Headquarters, Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Service/AFRCC, Scott AFB, IL 62225. (1-800-851-3051). By phone.
10. Long Beach Press Telegram newspaper, October 2 through 9, 1954. 11. Los Angeles Times newspaper, March 21, 1944 and 2 through 9, October 1954.
12. Santa Barbara News Press newspaper, October 2 and 3, 1954, and March 20, 1944.